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TAGS: ASEC, PGOV, PREL, MASS, SE
SUBJECT: SEYCHELLES: GENERAL WARD/U.S. AFRICA COMMAND VISIT 19
AUGUST HELPS CEMENT NEW, CLOSER RELATIONSHIP

CLASSIFIED BY CDA Virginia Blaser for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: General William Ward, Commander, United States Africa Command, visited Seychelles on August 19, 2009. Accompanied by Charge d'Affaires Virginia Blaser, he met with President James Michel, Minister for Foreign Affairs Patrick Pillay, and Chief of the Seychelles Peoples Defense Forces (SPDF) Brigadier LQopold Payet. Common themes of the meetings were piracy, terrorism, smuggling, and the new bilateral Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The visit marked the highest-level U.S. military visit to Seychelles in recent memory and reaffirmed both the U.S. commitment to advancing military cooperation with the Seychelles and the continued US interest in the region. The warm welcome displayed by government officials and the press demonstrated both the Seychellois gratitude for U.S. engagement and desire for an even closer relationship. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) General William "Kip" Ward, Commander, United States Africa Command visited Seychelles on August 19, 2009, in the highest-level U.S. Military visit in recent memory to the island nation. Their first meeting was with Republic of Seychelles President James Michel.

Use Us As a Stationary Aircraft Carrier

3. (C) President Michel was accompanied by MFA Permanent Secretary Joseph Nourrice, Secretary of State Jean Paul Adam and U.S. Desk Officer Marie Angele Thomas. President Michel began by saying "I am happy to see this resurgence of American military activity in the Seychelles." He went on to say the Government of Seychelles (GOS) is "fully on board" with U.S. anti-piracy efforts, and to warmly offer his country as a base for those and other efforts. "We are an aircraft carrier in the middle of the Indian Ocean without the planes," he said. "We welcome your help in our fight against piracy." The Seychelles people will welcome the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), he said, and "see them as a comfort." Not only are Americans "very welcome in Seychelles," but "the next step is to transfer Africa Command to the Seychelles," Michel said with a smile.

Gen. Ward: You Understand the Threat

4. (C) General Ward thanked the President for his welcome and said the issues of piracy and terrorism affect all nations. GEN Ward offered that like Seychelles, other nations are beginning to see the importance of contributing what they can to defeat these transnational threats but also noted our enemies will take advantage and fill any void left open to them. The General stated the recently-completed Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) further enables our combined activities to counter the threat of piracy and threat of terror. He noted the recent photo of the P-3 aircraft in a local newspaper, calling it "a tangible sign of our efforts to move ahead." That is a manned system, he said, and "we look forward to introducing an unmanned system."

UAV "Experiment" and Its Possibilities

5. (S) General Ward said the UAV project, while initially will

focus on surveillance and counter piracy, it has the potential to also be used for other missions. Drug trafficking, weapons trafficking and terrorism are all threats, he continued, and the U.S. goal is to better inform both ourselves and our partner nations as to the extent of these activities. The General described the UAVs as a multi-role platform and added that the UAV has the ability to loiter which provides an ability to see but not with perfect clarity. General Ward asked the President to consider support to the other operations available to these specific UAVs. President Michel was non-committal, beyond noting that additional issues would need to be taken in a political context and somewhat carefully. (NOTE: The day after this meeting, Adam spoke privately to CDA to clarify this discussion, noting that the President had thought the General was referring to the UAVs as a possible offensive weapon, i.e. with arms against targets, including piracy and terrorism targets. Adam said that if that was the case, the President was not philosophically against such support, but that he would urge the USG to be extremely careful in raising the issue with anyone in the Government outside of the President. Such a request would be "politically extremely sensitive" and would have to be handled with "the utmost discreet care." END NOTE.)

Praise for the SOFA

6. (C) General Ward praised the GOS for ratifying the SOFA and assured the President of U.S. respect for the sovereignty of Seychelles. "President Obama understands the rights of nations," he said, and "we are working together as partners." He said Seychelles is "accepting its responsibility" as a member of the international community. He noted that without a SOFA, waiving the force protection requirement is always a difficult undertaking but having a SOFA in place makes it easier to decide where to place assets.

We'll Help You Deal with Pirates

7. (C) President Michel noted that the Seychelles was presently holding pirates but would soon be releasing them -- the court needed eyewitness testimony by law, but only received written statements from the detaining countries. Charge Blaser said the U.S. understands that Seychelles still needs to develop the infrastructure to enable it to legally hold, prosecute and incarcerate pirates. President Michel and

his Secretary of State enthusiastically concurred, and seemed relieved that their concerns had been heard. Charge Blaser continued by explaining that the United States is experienced in collecting evidence for piracy trials. "Due process is an important and established right in the United States legal system. We are easy to work with and look forward to working with you." General Ward said U.S. sailors understand the rules of evidence, and are experienced in collecting and protecting it until it can be turned over for prosecution. General Ward promised that military to military activities would continue and emphasized Coast Guard activities. He mentioned that contractors for Ocean Look-associated UAV project would begin arriving as early as August 24, eliciting a "thank you" from Adam.

Coast Guard Gives Pirate Skiff Tour

8. (SBU) After a brief press conference on the State House lawn (attended by opposition as well as ruling party press, at Embassy request), General Ward and Charge Blaser proceeded to Coast Guard Headquarters to see the recently-captured pirate boats. Head of the Seychelles Coast Guard, Colonel Donald Gertrude, met the General and Charge at his Command Post and led them on a tour of his command center and the captured pirate boats. Colonel Gertrude pointed out that the boats were small with a shallow draft, camouflaged, completely exposed to the elements, and contained many 55 gallon drums for fuel. In one of the small boats, a fuel drum had been cut open and used for an open cooking fire.

CHIEF OF SPDF Welcomes General WARD

9. (SBU) General Ward, Charge Blaser, and their staffs next met with Chief of the SPDF Brigadier Leopold Payet. The meeting was also attended by Secretary of State Jean Paul Adam, Chief of Staff for the SPDF Colonel Leon Clifford Roseline, and Head of the Seychelles Coast Guard Colonel Donald Gertrude. Brigadier Payet opened the meeting by saying, "I feel like we are brothers and sisters! You are most welcome." He continued to thank the U.S. Government and the U.S. Embassy for their assistance and expressed his hope for more training and more help from the United States. With UAVs, "things will work, thanks to the U.S., so we can keep our islands safe."

Partnership in a Connected World

10. (SBU) General Ward repeated his earlier statements concerning the U.S. desire for a strong bilateral relationship in a difficult global context, and his praise for the SOFA ratification. He pointed out that the small pirate boats he had just seen illustrated that that crossing long distances is no longer difficult. Charge Blaser praised the growth in the relationship and cooperation between the two countries.

Island Woes: Piracy, Terrorism, Drugs

11. (C) Secretary of State Adam raised the issue that the Seychelles' vibrant catamaran rental industry has ceased as a result of the increase in pirate activities. While, overall, tourism is now improving, cruise ship visits have slowed, and the inter-island ferry service now requires armed coast guard escort. The Seychelles Ports Authority will not authorize small vessels to travel to the outer reaches of the Seychelles Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ). Chief of Staff Roseline said that while he was concerned about piracy, drug smuggling is also a growing problem and that the GOS is also aware of terrorist movements and of the vulnerability of air traffic to a terror threat. The Chief of Staff stated the GOS is planning to create an "anti-terror program" to prevent terrorism as well as a "counter-terror" team to confront possible attackers, he said. Seychelles is not prepared for terrorism now, and the GOS is especially concerned about a "Bali" style scenario, he went on.

Working Together

12. (C) General Ward stated that each nation must do its part in order to defeat these common enemies together. The General said Africa Command's mission is to "ensure that what we do supports sustained security development" of our partners. Charge Blaser noted that Mauritians are concerned about many of the same issues, and recommended that "we all look for new ways to link and facilitate programs to enhance cooperation and create opportunities to work together." Colonel Roseline said the Seychelles and Mauritius concluded a bilateral security agreement some years ago but "have never exercised that agreement," despite the considerable travel between the two island nations.

Defense Not Corruptible, Police Are

13. (C) Brigadier Payet, when asked how many police and defense forces he had, responded that there are about 500 people in the SPDF. He also volunteered that the SPDF works very closely with the police. Adam noted that the SPDF are seen as incorruptible while the police are perceived by the population to be corrupt.

Comment

14. (C) The warmth of the Seychellois welcome provides a sufficient measure of the success of the visit. The message relayed by the General in charge of Africa Command reinforced and strengthened the bilateral relationship at a time when Seychelles faces a number of regional and national security threats; to include piracy and smuggling. The Seychellois responded not only with a warm welcome but with a palpable sense of relief at having finally secured the return of the U.S. military to Seychelles, albeit for a temporary program. Press coverage was overwhelmingly positive and the senior leader engagement reinforces the bilateral cooperation. END COMMENT.

BLASER